

08/06/92

**SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke**

Airline departure recently from San Angelo to Alaska was at 8:45 a.m. and arrival at Anchorage was at 4:20 p.m., showing a loss of three hours. But that day, July 8, was the longest day in Alaska, some 21 hours and 36 minutes from sunrise to sunset.

I had to come a day ahead of the Smithsonian group I was joining. Alaska tundra requires a different kind of gear from the needed in the Shortgrass Country, which is so close to the Chihuahuan desert that gnats have to water out on the damp side of cactus leaves.

Big decisions had to be faced about the bears and the mosquitoes up there. Brown bears, or grizzlies, have weak eyesight and identify humans by their superior sense of smell. Artic mosquitoes watch for upright creatures by spotting field glasses or cameras hanging around their necks; or, in the case of the natives, they look for handheld fishing rods or old washpans used to pan for gold.

So the problem was whether to hide behind a cap fitted in dark netting to confuse the insects as to who or what was hiding behind the veils, or risk wearing one of those thick screened caps which impair vision and increase the odds of stumbling upon a renegade bear.

Heavy Japanese fishing line, woven to withstand schools of tuna, will break the diving speed of any winged insect, including the flies raised in Maine and in the Black Forest of Germany. However, once an Alaskan mosquito has revved up to full throttle, he'll make a piece of new hail screen look like the back-up props at a target range.

After a nap of three hours and 24 minutes in a \$160 a day hotel room, I decided to take a walk around the bay side of Anchorage and weigh the decisions. The morning newspaper reported two fatalities from bear attacks, making 29 victims since records began in 1902.

The mosquitoes were relatively quiet along the water front, no bears had been reported except the one black one removed the day before from downtown Anchorage by the police and park rangers.

By noon the army surplus store promised they'd be sold out of mosquito netting. Furthermore, an oldtimer had brought the news that he was more afraid of tourist traffic in the summer and snowmobile charges in the winter than of the meanest bear in all 50 states.

All of this brought on such a distraction on my walk that I overlooked the open flap on a pocket in my day pack. By the time it was noticed, mosquitoes had broken the seal of a high powered repellent and knocked off enough straight shots to lower the level to half-mark.

One clue was developing. The outfitter working for Smithsonian recommended bringing along hiking boots heavily treated in waterproofing dope. The label on the leather dauber can at the army surplus store claimed it contained mink oil and beef tallow.

Things began to fit together. The move was to keep my feet dry to increase my speed and to buy a beekeeper's hat to throw the mosquitoes and the bears off the trail. Excess water proofing on exposed parts might entice the mosquitoes the first few days, but after the ink oil and beef tallow seasoned, the bears and the mosquitoes would surely make other choices.

The clerk at the army store stayed hidden behind the cash register. Selling six-bit items lifted from the tax payers' tolls requires an undercover type personality. I wanted to tell him the story about the time my paternal grandfather and his partner Frank roped a bear down on Devil's River in Texas, but apparently his interest were elsewhere.